Mobilising media studies in an age of datafication

By Lina Dencik

In what Mosco (2018) has described as the 'post-internet' era, defined by radical transformations in mediated activity brought about by convergent forces of cloud computing, big data analytics and the Internet of Things, how should we understand what is at stake? Marked by centralisation and commercialisation, a media increasingly organised around the mass collection and analysis of data have specific and significant societal implications that are in need of thorough and critical investigation. Yet, the way such investigation should be approached is itself up for grabs and the parameters of debate are continuously being defined and struggled over. We are therefore at an important moment for understanding and deciding what is at stake with datafication: what issues do we privilege, and which do we ignore? What visions for society do we aspire to and which ones do we deem out of bounds? For this anniversary issue of *Television & New Media,* I reflect upon the increasingly important and politicised role we play as media scholars in this space. I do so with the recognition that established methods in media studies dedicated to upholding experiences, revealing power relations, and situating practices are particularly pertinent in an age of datafication, but often difficult to carry out. They are so for a number of reasons that are in part to do with the nature of processes of datafication, the obscurity that surround them, and the difficulty in assessing their impact on lived experiences. In part, it has also to do with the active neutralisation of data-centric technologies and their implications, and the concerted efforts made to narrow the parameters for how we understand both problems and solutions that might emerge from them.

It can be tempting to regard the turn to data as merely a technical development, one driven by technological possibility and one that is predominantly quantitative in significance: more information, processed faster. However, as a starting point, we need to understand that the desire and ability to quantify and tabulate more and more of social life is a trend significant both in its history and implications. This is important for our understanding of what is at stake and how to approach it. I therefore start by briefly outlining some central insights into the premises of datafication before moving on to discussing the need to question the way challenges and responses are framed and how media studies can provide key contributions by placing an emphasis on situated practices, experiences and imaginaries as a way to expand the parameters of research, and ultimately politicise the debate.

The nature of contemporary data developments is not an inevitable outcome of technological progression but is rather a result of an amalgamation of different actors and social forces, and a particular political economy. Likewise, despite frequent descriptions of data as a natural resource, something that simply exists and is there for the taking, the creation, extraction and value attributed to data is not a given, but compounded in powerful interests and assumptions. Sadowski (2019) refers to datafication as a 'political economic regime' in which the drive to accumulate data now propels new ways of doing business and governance. Whilst not the same as profit, data shares the same logic in that just as we expect corporations to be profit-driven, we should now expect organisations to be data-driven. This is significant as it shifts our understanding of data from being merely a commodity, to being a form of capital – one that is accumulated through extraction and exploited for value. In such a context, there has been a need to ensure that not only mediated communication but social life in general could take the form of data. The digital platform, Couldry and Mejias (2018: 338) argue, is the central mechanism for this transformation in that it *produces* the social for capital. That is, 'a form of "social" that makes it ready for appropriation and exploitation for value as data, when combined with other data similarly appropriated.'

Moreover, the value attributed to data is rooted in particular epistemological and ontological assumptions that carry great significance. Van Dijck (2014) has described it as a paradigm grounded in 'dataism', the ideological component of datafication that privileges certain forms of knowledge and social order. Not only is there an assumption that (objective) data flows through neutral technological channels, but also that there is 'a self-evident relationship between data and people, subsequently interpreting aggregated data to predict individual behavior'. In other words, the drive towards datafication is rooted in a belief in the capacity of data to interpret social life, sometimes better or more objectively than pre-digital (human) interpretations. As Harcourt (2015) describes it, power comes to circulate through a new form of rationality, one that is based on algorithmically processed data-sets driven by a 'digital *doppelgänger* logic' in search of our data double. It is such logic that informs not only the notion of personalisation but, as Andrejevic (2019) argues, an imperative of pre-emption premised on operationalism; a media industry in pursuit of total information capture organised around automated data processing with the view to anticipate and respond to human behaviour and actions in advance.

Paying attention to these underlying interests, logics and assumptions in datafication is important for debates on what is actually at stake with these developments. Whilst initial debates on the advent of mass data collection tended to present the issue as one of the potential for greater efficiency and (state) security on the one hand and concerns with increased surveillance and infringements on individual privacy on the other, in recent years we have seen a shift in concerns that have highlighted broader social issues. These have pointed to the way the turn to data-driven systems in different contexts can undermine democratic processes, might entrench or introduce inequalities, can further discrimination or exclusion of certain groups, or can dehumanise interaction and decision-making around contentious and sensitive issues. Redden and Brand (2018) have assembled a 'data harm record' that provide a typology of different harms in relation to data that foreground what we might consider a much broader politics of social justice that emerges in the dislocations between data control, data subjects and lived experiences (Hintz, Dencik & Wahl-Jorgensen 2018).

How should we engage with such issues? Here I want to make the case that the field of media studies and media scholars play an increasingly pertinent role by placing an emphasis on the imaginaries, actors and social contexts in which technology is developed and put to use. Whilst concerns about inequality and harms speak to the need for political engagement, we have seen these instead captured by a growing 'ethics' agenda, emerging particularly from within the technology industry, that often frame the intervention in terms of codes, guidelines or the set-up of voluntary associations. These have predominantly remained relatively abstract or concerned with what we might consider *micro-ethics*, an orientation around the individual practitioner and a compliance regime that ensures no friction with the bottom-line or engagement with fundamental questions of premise (Stark and Hoffman 2019; Taylor and Dencik, 2020). In addition, in many cases this approach has also led to a narrowing of focus to the data-sets or algorithms themselves, positing that the causes of harms that may emerge from data collection and use can be traced to 'insufficiencies', 'errors' or 'bias' in the design or application; causes that essentially have technological solutions, preferably through further data collection and algorithmic sophistication. A growing community of scholars and engineers now concerns itself with creating more inclusive data-sets, developing algorithms that can better account for diverse experiences, and pursuing computational criteria for coding fairness into design (Barocas et al. 2018).

Yet whilst such efforts may be very worthwhile, they tend to bypass any comprehensive political engagement with datafication, the type of engagement that has been central to media studies research with its emphasis on the situated, practices, experiences and meaning-making. As Livingstone (2019) has argued, in our quest to understand the dynamics of contemporary datafication we need to return to a concern with the kind of agency that has been the long-standing focus of audience research. Similarly, Kennedy (2018) has stressed that as we try to come to terms with the significance of digital traces and algorithms, we must not stop speaking to people – both in settings of the extraordinary and the ordinary – to really understand the nature and remit of data politics. In particular, drawing on Couldry's (2004) notion of media as practice and the call to 'decentre' media, there is a need to place the study of data firmly within a broader sociology of action and knowledge. This requires us to attend to the actual practices, imaginaries and negotiations of people who rely on data-driven systems in their work and lives in order to gain particular and process-focused analyses that 'decentres' data and algorithms (Dencik 2019).

Rather than understanding effects based on the data and the technology, media studies can instead emphasise the uses to which such technology are put in social life, exploring how data practices relate to other social practices, to institutional contexts, histories and resources. This allows us to *situate* data and reject data-driven systems as *de facto* things or technical artefacts, and instead see them as part of a continuously constructed project, shaped by multiple, converging and conflicting forces. Such an approach contributes to the active politicisation of datafication as it appears as a site of struggle across social life, thus also opening up the parameters of response.

It is increasingly important for media scholars to hold on to this politicisation of datafication, where data politics is not just confined to the data-driven systems themselves but the wider contexts in which they are being implemented and used, in light of the active neutralisation of understandings of what is at stake. This is happening in a social condition where the collection and use of data is often presented as an inevitability or what Turow (2017) has described as a new kind of social imaginary that positions data-centric technologies as common sense. Frequently couched in terms of progress and innovation that has reached new heights in its most recent incarnation as 'Artificial Intelligence' (AI), a condition of 'surveillance realism' (Dencik 2018) or 'AI realism' (McQuillan 2019) is being manifested that posits data-driven technology as not only a natural part of everyday life, but as the only legitimate response to a

range of social ills. In this light, critique is inevitably confined to focus on ways to ethically handle data or how to 'fix' or 'correct' technology that actively bypasses the kind of critique that emerges from an entry-point that 'decentres' technology in order to contend with the way such technologies are situated in relation to historical and systemic forms of domination (Gangadharan & Niklas 2019). We need, therefore, to be alert to the terms of the debate, how we are made to understand developments and what issues are foregrounded and which are marginalised or ignored, something media studies scholars are well-equipped to do. Moreover, shifting the entry-point and reasserting the importance of long-standing traditions in media studies that attend to interests, practices and experiences pushes back against the dogma of inevitability and reveals datafication as a mere contingency, one that needs to be transformed from the taken-for-granted into the up-for-grabs. This active politicisation of datafication is a contribution from the field that will only become more significant in times to come.

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